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# Watsonville's May election called off

## Public hearings on districting planned

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The Watsonville City Council made it clear yesterday that the community would help decide how to divide up the city for district elections.

The council also acted unanimously to cancel the May 9 election, to hire a demographer who would help with districting, and to hold at least two public meetings to explain districting plans and hear comments.

The current council members will remain in office until a districting plan is in place, City Attorney Don Haile said. He said it was his opinion that going ahead with an at-large election May 9 would be a violation of the Voting Rights Act, in light of the Supreme Court decision, and recommended that the election also be postponed on the city's proposed bond issue.

"There doesn't seem to be any sense in going ahead with an election that's going to cost \$20,000," he said, when another election would have to be held in a few months, after a districting plan is devised and approved by Judge William Ingram of the U.S. District Court in San Jose.

It is unclear at this point whether all council seats would be up for election immediately upon the approval of a districting plan, or if voting for council members would be staggered over some period of time.

The council voted to cancel the entire election, and to notify a committee formed to promote a proposed park bond measure that it should disband.

Haile pointed out that the election suit would not be laid to rest until a districting plan

was in place. Referring to comments made by Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund attorney Joaquin Avila, that further court action could result if the city's final plan was perceived as violating voting rights, Haile said the council may need to meet again in closed session if that was the case.

The council voted to cancel the election at a special meeting called last night in response to the U.S. Supreme Court's 9-0 decision Monday not to review Watsonville's election-suit case. That decision ended four years of litigation between the city and MALDEF, which filed suit in May 1985 on grounds that Watsonville's at-large election system was discriminatory to Hispanics because it diluted their power to elect candidates of their choice to the council.

MALDEF had won similar suits in Texas, and selected Watsonville, which at the time had no Hispanic on the council, as a test case for California. Its victory here will inspire other suits in cities throughout the state, Avila said.

The mood among Hispanics and supporters of district elections attending yesterday's meeting seemed one of quiet joy, accented at times by scattered applause and cheers.

A number of people arrived a few minutes late with Cruz Gomez, a plaintiff in the MALDEF suit who ran unsuccessfully for the council in 1983 and announced her intentions earlier this month to run again. They carried signs, many of them written in Spanish, that read "Cruz Gomez, the Hispanics are with you in this great victory," "Representation, participation now" and "We

# MALDEF

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want district elections. 100 years is too late.”

Gomez urged the council to include in the districting process “the points of view of all the community.”

“The people are here asking for that,” she said.

Apparently referring to the five years that have elapsed since she last ran for the council, Gomez said, “It isn’t just the five years, it’s the 100 years before. This is a historic time and I hope we can handle it well.”

Rebecca Garcia, president of the local League of United Latin American Citizens and also a council candidate, had asked prior to Gomez’s arrival that the council include in the districting process not only the MALDEF plaintiffs, but groups such as LULAC, the United Farm Workers and all other community members supporting district elections.

Mayor Betty Murphy assured Garcia and Gomez that everyone wanting to participate would have that opportunity.

Councilman Dennis Osmer suggested that a range of districting plans be considered, and that the plaintiffs in the election suit be invited to help devise a preliminary districting plan.

Murphy said the council could not consider a “myriad” of plans, but could perhaps look at three of them: MALDEF’s original seven-district plan filed in court; another plan proposed by Councilman Vido Deretich (who could not attend yesterday’s meeting) for six districts and an at-large mayor; and a third plan the demographer might devise.

After talking to New York attorney Vincent Fontana, who represented the city in the MALDEF suit, Mayor Betty Murphy said it was her understanding the cost of a demographer would be covered by the city’s insurance policy, which also paid for the city’s court fight against the election suit.

Murphy requested that the city hire professional demographer Peter Morrison, who previously studied Watsonville’s census data for testimony during the MALDEF trial in federal district court in San Jose.

Osmer asked that the council hire an independent demographer to work with city staff, rather than Morrison. Garcia had also asked the council to hire a demographer agreeable to everyone.

The council agreed to Osmer’s request, but Osmer said this morning he would ask for a progress report at Tuesday’s council meeting on hiring a demographer. He said he wanted to make it clear he did not think the city should hire Morrison.

Councilman Rex Clark also proposed that some way be found to consider in districting plans Watsonville residents who have arrived since 1980, when the last census was completed, because a districting plan must be based on a census.

For Gray